

WORKPLACE DEATHS AT THE RACETRACK

By Joseph Black

Each spring across the U.S. participants in the warm-weather sports of baseball, tennis and golf start their seasons. Another sure sign of spring is heard with the loud roar of the engines at auto racing venues across America. The roar is heard at venues from the smallest dirt tracks to the large paved oval tracks, road courses and drag strips in the highest profile series in NASCAR, the IRL & the NHRA. There has been a large increase in popularity of NASCAR and auto racing in general over the last two decades brought about by the film "Days of Thunder" which has helped NASCAR to grow from a regional sport to a national sport. The increased popularity, however, has heightened the awareness that with the thrills of the sport there is the potential for tragedy, especially after the crash in the final lap of the Daytona 500 in February of 2001 which took the life of one of its biggest stars, Dale Earnhardt Sr.

In this article I will use BLS data to look at the number of fatalities involving spectator sports workers in the U.S. for the years 2003-2008 compared to fatality numbers from 3 of the major racing series in the U.S. for that period. A 16-page special report written by Liz Chandler of *the Charlotte Observer* entitled "Death at the Track" from November 11, 2001 addressed the high number of fatalities in auto racing along with possible measures that could be taken to reduce the number of fatalities. In the article it was reported that for the period from 1990 through that date in 2001 there were more than 260 auto racing fatalities in the U.S. Among the deaths counted in this study were 204 drivers, 29 spectators, 24 track workers and crew and three journalists in all levels of U.S. auto racing from NASCAR and the open wheel series IRL & Champ Car to the dirt-track races.

Below is a comparison of the number of fatalities in all spectator sports vs. the number of fatalities in 3 of the most prominent sanctioning bodies in the US: NASCAR, the Indy Racing League (formerly split with Champ Car/CART) and the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA).

AUTO RACING FATALITIES IN THE U.S., 2003-2008						
NAICS	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
71121 Spectator Sports	25	31	23	20	25	25
711211 Sports Teams and Clubs	*	*	*	*	5	*
711212 Racetracks	5	5	8	5	6	9
711219 Other Spectator Sports	19	22	13	14	13	15
RACING ORGANIZATIONS	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Open-wheel racing (IRL & ChampCar)	1			1		
NASCAR (All Series)		1			1	
Drag Racing (NHRA)		1	1		1	2

NOTES CONCERNING BLS DATA:

*Indicates no data or data that do not meet BLS publication criteria. Totals for major categories may include subcategories not shown separately.

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries.

Fatality information for racing organizations from article titled "Deaths In Auto Racing"

Injuries /Fatalities in auto racing would be included in the BLS data in the chart on the previous page under the following NAICS codes:

*5-digit NAICS 71121 Spectator Sports which includes workplace fatalities in all spectator sports

*6-digit NAICS 711212 Racetracks which include facilities for staging not only auto races but also dog and horse racing tracks as well (This NAICS would only include employees of the racing facilities-not necessarily the event participants)

*6-digit NAICS 711219 Other Spectator Sports which includes:

- independent athletes such as pro or semipro golfers, boxers and race car drivers primarily engaged in participating in live sporting or racing events before a paying audience
- owners of cars, dogs and horses (which would include racing teams)
- establishments such as sports trainers who are primarily engaged in providing specialized services required to support participants in sports events or competitions

The above chart shows that of the major U.S. series in open-wheel racing, stock car racing and drag racing the NHRA in drag racing has suffered 5 fatalities for the period from 2003-2008 whereas both NASCAR and the IRL/Champ Car have each had 2. The 2 in NASCAR is a decrease from the 3 years prior to the 2003-2008 time period in which there were 4 fatalities in all of NASCAR's series.

For more information please see the following websites:

www.motorsportmemorial.org – This website has a listing of worldwide motorsport fatalities for each year from 1896 up to the present time in 2010.

<http://www.nsxprime.com/forums/showthread.php?s=e6f10729a531da6956d53fc5cced2afb&t=11313> – “Fatal Accidents Aren’t Flukes: The average is 22 a year” by Liz Chandler of the Charlotte Observer. This article was written in 2001 and appeared in the newspaper as a result of their investigation which describes the situation as it was after 4 deaths in all NASCAR series from May 2000 through Dale Earnhardt’s death in February of 2001.

<http://www.jcs-group.com/racin/living/deaths.html> - “Deaths in Auto Racing” – This article has more information about the Charlotte Observer investigation into auto racing deaths in 2001. Liz Chandler. (Knight Ridder Newspapers staff writers Ames Alexander, Peter St. Onge, Andrew Shain and Diane Suchetka contributed to this report.) Auto racing's death toll is surprisingly high, investigation finds. [The Charlotte Observer](http://www.charlotteobserver.com). November 09, 2001.

<http://auto.howstuffworks.com/auto-racing/nascar/nascar-basics/nascar-safety.htm> - This “How Stuff Works” site describes advances in safety implements by NASCAR after the fatal crash involving Dale Earnhardt in 2001

<http://www.saferacer.com/> - This vendor’s website illustrates the latest in auto racing safety gear.